



Ed Charles

by Edward Hoyt

Season	Age	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	SB	CS	BA	OBP	SLG
1969 Mets	35	61	169	21	35	8	1	3	18	18	31	4	2	.207	.286	.320
Career 8 Years	—	1005	3482	438	917	147	30	86	421	332	425	86	35	.263	.330	.397

As a big leaguer, Ed Charles was perhaps the most accomplished player in the brief history of the ill-fated Kansas City Athletics, and he achieved fame as a baseball poet, reciting his poetry on television a few times per year and mailing verse to young fans with requested autographs. But he is best remembered today for the end of his playing career, providing sorely needed veteran presence and perspective on the magically youthful “Miracle Mets” championship squad of 1969. He was known as “The Glider,” “Ez,” and “The Poet Laureate of Baseball,” but the first name that stuck—so to speak—was “Gum,” a nickname he inherited from his father.

If Edwin Douglas Charles had never played a day in the big leagues, his story would still be remarkable. Coming of baseball age in the era immediately following the triumphs of Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby, Ed Charles—along with legends such as Hank Aaron and largely forgotten contemporaries such as Percy Miller and Nat Peoples—was part of the generation that repeated Robinson’s and Doby’s brave stories in dozens of minor leagues on the rosters of the hundreds of teams and that crisscrossed America by bus each summer. These leagues were concentrated in the Deep South—leagues like the Southern Association, the Carolina League, and the Texas League,

with roots going back to the 19th century, and still flourishing today.

It was a world that was largely unready to let go of Jim Crow, and a world whose desegregation would not occur with a national press corps watching. And Charles, a son of Daytona Beach, of segregation, lynching, a broken home, and the Great Depression, was an unlikely champion.

His generation of African-American ballplayers would challenge and change the culture of the major leagues, as society at large was undergoing a parallel change. Before all that, Charles arrived in the big leagues—disgracefully late, at almost 29—a veteran of too many racially charged hot southern summers, and a part of that brave generation of minor leaguers that followed Jackie Robinson, who played and lived in the much smaller, but equally dangerous, spotlight. Many of these athletes never made the major leagues. Charles was a survivor of this generation, and he did them proud.

The sensitivity later evident in Ed Charles’s poetry made the hypocrisy of the world he grew up in that much more vivid. Born April 29, 1933 in Daytona Beach (three years before the city now so deeply linked with auto racing hosted its first official stock car race), Charles would later recall his school days reciting the pledge of allegiance and reading the United States Constitution, and feeling acutely how



those words really didn't apply to him. His home life offered little respite from this paradox. Growing up in a family of nine children in a dilapidated segregated section of town, he recalled his father beating his mother, then getting his in kind from the local police. Food could be as scarce as opportunities, and the boy Ed Charles sought to fend for himself as best as he could. Like too many sons of broken homes, and too many African-American children unable to find meaning in their second-class education, Charles became a dropout.

One incident he would later recall had he and his brothers trying to retrieve a toy that had been stolen by white children. Rather than support them, his grandfather whipped them for confronting the white children—his way of harshly underscoring his warning to his grandchildren that they could get lynched for such confrontations. It was no far-fetched notion. One Lee Snell had been killed in that manner in Daytona Beach when Ed was five.

Charles's story is certainly one of talent and hard work, but a key X factor that helped change the course of his life is that his hometown was where the Brooklyn Dodgers trained, and young Ed got a front row seat at the story that finally told black America that opportunities could open up for them: the debut of Jack Roosevelt "Jackie" Robinson in a major league training camp in 1946. Robinson, who had faced an army court-martial rather than give up a bus seat as an army lieutenant two years earlier, was twice forced to sacrifice his and his wife's airline seats to white passengers on his way across the country and made the last leg of the journey to spring training exiled to the back of a bus crossing Florida. Embarrassed and bitter, Robinson considered quitting, but he bravely took the field and began his long march into history. Ed Charles never forgot, and would refer to Robinson as a way-shower and redeemer.

"I was just a kid, and I was awed by it all, and I prayed for him," Charles recalled. "I would say, 'Please, God, let him show the whites what we can do so that we can excel like they can.'"¹

To hear Charles tell it, even at 13, he knew what the moment meant—that to have aspirations, to succeed, to prosper, to merely be accepted as a human being, was suddenly a rational notion, be-

cause fulfillment of those aspirations had moved into the realm of the possible. If Robinson could succeed in smashing the unstated ban on black ballplayers in the big leagues, all other aspects of Jim Crow were perhaps also giants that could come crashing down.

Charles had already been a Dodgers fan, getting their games on the radio in Daytona and buying into the "Bums" reputation as champions of the downtrodden. But that was before Jackie. Charles described himself as sitting on the left field fence, unable to afford a ticket, and perhaps positioning himself to better fetch home run balls. Charles has told the following account to many writers, and the accounts may differ slightly on small details.

Everybody in our part of town wanted to see him. Old people and small children, invalids and town drunks. Some were on crutches, and some people clutched the arms of friends, walking slowly on parade to the ballpark to sit in the segregated section.

We watched him play that day and finally believed what we had read in the papers, that one of us was out there on the ball field. When [spring training] was over, we kids followed Jackie as he walked with his teammates down to the train station, and when the train pulled out, we ran down the tracks listening for the sounds as far as we could. And when we finally couldn't hear it any longer, we ran some more and finally stopped and put our ears to the tracks so we could feel the vibrations of that train carrying Jackie Robinson. We wanted to be a part of him as long as we could.²

But the road to fulfill that redemption made possible by Robinson remained long and rocky for the boy left behind in Daytona Beach. Leaving school after eighth grade, he drifted around Florida to live with various relatives—a grandfather, then an older brother, finally an older sister in St. Petersburg. It was there he began to find some stability, finding work as a dishwasher in a restaurant and working his way up to assistant baker, meanwhile receiving local notice starring for a neighborhood softball team, the Harlem Hawks. And a modestly anonymous life as an indifferently educated baker may have been his destiny, if romance hadn't intervened. Bringing

home pies from work for his neighbors, Ed found himself smitten with a girl on his street—and she wasn't particularly interested in pursuing a relationship with a dropout, even one with pies. So Charles not only re-entered school, but did so in the 10th grade, not wanting to be a year behind his would-be girlfriend. He told the registrar at his new St. Petersburg school that his previous school in Daytona Beach had burned down, along with their records, and they took him at his word.

Along with the boost for his nascent romance, this proved beneficial for Charles's nascent athletic career at Gibbs High School. His most enduring memory was from the gridiron. He was sent in as a sophomore for his first punt, saw the lineman rushing him, and missed the kick completely. "Don't worry," his coach said. "You'll get another chance to make good."

Two years later, Charles was team captain of the baseball team, gaining the notice of scouts, but also starting quarterback of that same football squad, as Gibbs went undefeated and won the state Class A championship. Charles had made good on his second chance. What became of the girl is unclear.

His initial audition was with the then-Boston Braves—actually with their Class B team. While he was rejected by the team, he was excited to be the first black player to try out. Ed was considering an offer from a Negro League team—the Indianapolis Clowns—but a chance meeting with executive Vern Eckert got him another tryout in 1952 in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, this time for the Braves' Class C affiliate. He was signed to join the Quebec City Braves.

The Provincial League was a world away from Daytona Beach. Quebec had an established history of welcoming black athletes. And the league, just then transitioning from independence into affiliating with big league teams, was home to many African-Americans, including Negro League veterans and young stars like Charles on their way to the bigs.

There are, indeed, accounts of black players in the league as far back as the 1800s, and they were a constant part of Quebec baseball from the 1920s forward. Of the first six black players signed by big league clubs in 1946, four had played in Quebec and one was Canadian-born. Others in the league at the

time included Vic Power, Bob Trice, Carlos Bernier, Silvio Garcia, and longtime Homestead Gray and future Hall of Famer (2006) Ray Brown, who still had enough in the tank to help pitch three Quebecois clubs to titles in that era. Charles's manager and occasional first baseman was former big leaguer George McQuinn, a solid first baseman who made seven All-Star teams in his younger days.

It was an uncharacteristically benevolent environment for Charles to start his pro career. The team finished second, 1½ games out, and Ed acquitted himself more than respectably for a rookie, batting .317, slugging .431, and leading the league with 11 triples—probably the outstanding offensive player on the team apart from a juggernaut half season put up by a minor league journeyman named John Werner. The only other teammate from Quebec City who went on to enjoy more than a brief cup of big league coffee was Humberto Robinson, another of Robinson's "disciples." This Robinson, a pitcher, became the first Panamanian-born big leaguer, helping pave the way for the likes of Rod Carew, Manny Sanguillen, and Mariano Rivera and 45 others. Also the first African-American to pitch for the Jacksonville Braves in the South Atlantic League, Robinson would set a Sally League record with 23 wins in 1954. He was additionally notable for reporting a \$1,500 offer to throw a game in 1959.

Having never been out of Florida, Charles was simply used to being called "nigger" in white environments. But though he braced himself for that sort of attack, it never came. His landlords were white schoolteachers and surprised him with their tolerance. At worst, the black players were treated as a novelty, and Charles recalled being followed by a pack of small children as they walked to the ballpark, maybe reminiscent of young Ed and his friends following Jackie Robinson and the Dodgers to the train station.

It was perhaps important to go through Quebec and show himself and his organization that he could play professional baseball, because the next eight years would lead him through a breadth of Dixie locales—Corpus Christi, Louisville, Jacksonville, Fort Lauderdale among them—that would challenge him more than any fastball. For all Robinson's heroism, Jackie merely touched down in the



South before rising also to Quebec—famously starring for the Montreal Royals—and then on to the major leagues, which was still centered in the industrial belt. Charles spent the better part of a decade eating on the bus while his teammates went into restaurants, relieving himself in the shrubs, bunking with local black families while his teammates stayed in hotels, a quota system leading to the release of black players over less talented whites, and of course enduring the abuses and obstructions of fans—knowing all the while how disposable he was if he let these second-rate conditions affect his game. Some white teammates were supportive, but certainly not all, and the black players knew that if they complained to management of racial harassment from a white player, the team would likely deal with it based on who had the higher batting average. Getting justice was about continuing to hit.

The 1953 season saw Charles assigned to the Fort Lauderdale affiliate of the Milwaukee Braves. He would describe the season as his favorite of his tour of the southern states. One of four black players on the team, his status as a native Floridian helped him garner the support of local newspapers as well as African-American fans. The familiarity of the environment also played to his favor. While the eating/lodging/travelling restrictions of segregation were firmly in place, the circuit hit larger cities like Tampa-St. Petersburg, West Palm Beach, and Miami, thus avoiding (at least to Charles's mind), the harsher sting of racial strife that he saw as present in the smaller Floridian towns. His manager in Fort Lauderdale was the old St. Louis Cardinal All-Star Pepper Martin. Charles enjoyed playing for "The Wild Horse of the Osage" and felt that all Martin judged their players by was how well they played.

After spending 1954 and a chunk of 1955 in the military, Charles found himself at spring training in 1956 in a competition for a big league job with future Met Felix Mantilla, and veteran Danny O'Connell. Unfortunately for Charles, who had mostly played shortstop in the minors, the available



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Ed Charles

job was at second base. The Braves ended the competition by trading for veteran Red Schoendienst and making Mantilla the utility infielder. Ed was left on the outside looking in and sent to join the Wichita Braves.

It was in Wichita that an incident almost led Charles to quit. Juan Pizarro, an Afro-Puerto Rican, had an injured leg but his coaches insisted he go through the running workout. Seeing Pizarro running at a depressed speed, the coach told him that if he didn't want to run he could go back to Africa. Abuse from fans, opponents, even teammates was one thing, but being undercut by coaches was another. A discouraged Charles recounted the incident by phone to his grandfather, a Baptist minister in Daytona Beach. The advice he got was to simply sleep on it before making a decision. Ed thought that night of what Robinson endured without quitting, and he recommitted himself the next day. Charles would remember this as his low point, and he never again entertained the thought of quitting. Pizarro went on to an 18-year big-league career.

Ed would remember his South Atlantic League years as the most abusive circuit he played in—describing the racial taunts in Knoxville and Macon as so harsh as to make him appreciate the relative tolerance of Corpus Christi, Daytona Beach, and St. Petersburg. It was in Knoxville, playing for the Jacksonville Braves, that Charles recalled one of

the best games of his life—diving stops on defense and spraying the ball all over the place on offense—only to be stopped by a spectator on the way out of the stadium.

“This southern gentleman was standing there,” Charles said. “And he said to me, ‘By golly, nigger, you are one hell of a ballplayer.’”

Charles looked back at the man. “I just shook my head and walked on by him.”³

In one account, Charles recalls that story with frustration, but in a later recollection, he sees a minor victory in winning as much respect as the heckler could muster, suggesting the man’s racism would have been that much more acute had he not watched Charles play (and play well) that Sunday. “Any forum of integration can lift the cloud of ignorance from us.”⁴ The most challenging situations also provided some of the more satisfying victories. The integration of the team forced the integration of other aspects of society when black and white players were asked to go together to represent the team at functions and charity events.

*You had a chance to interact with whites in various fields. It gave us a chance to know each other better. Once you get to know someone, you’re not going to feel as threatened. You probably tend to be more compassionate toward that person. You reach a higher level of a relationship when you interact together.*⁵

The turmoil reflected itself perhaps in the win column. That 1957 Jacksonville team, a perennial contender prior to that season, finished sixth, eventually needing two managerial changes to finish the season.

The next three seasons were a period of intense frustration for Charles. Stuck at the AAA level in Wichita, Louisville, and finally Vancouver, as he put together three batting years that would suggest to any observer that he was big league material, hitting .284, .270, and .305, respectively. While Charles would in later years cite a quota system keeping him on the farm, one reality was that the Braves had star slugger Eddie Mathews at third base (Charles had moved to the hot corner in 1959). The Braves nonetheless tried many players at second base—a position Charles apparently also considered him-

self a candidate for—during this period, including aging vets like the white Red Schoendienst and the Mexican Bobby Avila. Charles saw himself and his talents as deliberately overlooked. “Baby,” Charles would recall, “that was a hurtin’ thing.”⁶

It was winter ball in Puerto Rico in 1961 when Ed Charles first took up his hand at poetry. In truth, that which survives doesn’t indicate a special ability in the craft of verse—often evincing the novice poet’s practice of reversed phrasings and twisting of meter to resolve a rhyme scheme. What makes it compelling is the honest peek into the soul of a witness to such a brutal but important era in African-American history. A line about Jackie Robinson, “He ripped up the sod along the baselines,” initially seems quite prosaic, until you read on and slowly realize the sod was also the firmament of the American racial divide, and Jackie’s cleats were tearing it apart.

After several good seasons at the top of the minor league ladder, Charles was nearing the end of his twenties without so much as a day on a big league bench. But 1962 would be the second straight season of expansion in the big leagues, leaving teams with four more rosters to fill, and that offseason saw players regularly shuffled around to fill in gaps after the Mets and Houston Colt 45s (later Astros) established their initial rosters with the October expansion draft. Finally, on December 15, 1961, Ed Charles’s big break came: He was traded to the Kansas City Athletics with Joe Azcue and Manny Jimenez in exchange for Bob Shaw and Lou Klimchok (two future Mets, incidentally).

Having waited so long for his break, Charles disappointed neither himself nor his new employers. Given the third base job over Wayne Causey, Ed posted a .288 batting average, reached base at .356 clip, and slugged .454—his 17 homers that season would remain his career high. He made the league’s all-rookie team as the perennial sad-sack franchise increased its win total from 61 to 72.

But enigmatic A’s owner Charlie Finley lived up to his reputation. According to Charles, as he excelled throughout his rookie season while making the major league minimum of \$7,000, Finley made a point of tearing up his contract and substituting a \$10,000 contract in its place. After the season, how-



ever, Charles was never given the \$5,000 raise to \$15,000 that he had been promised. He was instead given a \$12,000 salary—\$5,000 over his original contract. The experience affected the third baseman's enthusiasm through his tenure in Kansas City.

Charles nonetheless capitalized on his chance and became a consistent performer on these Athletics teams. He offered no standout skill, but usefully adequate levels of contact, power, speed, and defense. He found a home in Kansas City—formerly the base of so many great Negro League teams—and married. The former dropout began taking college courses and eagerly awaited the birth of his first child. But when that son, Eric, came and was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, his career took on a new seriousness. He began to worry about the lifelong care his son would need. He would initially be shy about bringing his son to the ballpark as other players would with their children, fearing the negative attention the child's condition might attract.

Ironically, Charles has Finley to thank for perhaps becoming the most accomplished player in the short history of the Athletics tenure in Kansas City—in between their Philadelphia and Oakland addresses. The fickle Finley effectively operated as his own general manager, and made changes on a whim, firing his managers and strangely trying to imitate the Yankees' success by ordering a renovation of his stadium's outfield walls to match the dimensions of Yankee Stadium—a plan that was stopped by the league.

But Charles was a steady player who never quite rose to the level of "star." This sort of quiet success would eventually (and forever, presumably) make him the Kansas City Athletics' all-time leader in games played (726) and total bases (1,065). He is second in runs scored (344), hits (703), and runs batted in (319). Yet he never made the All-Star team as one of the top players on a club that never won more than 74 games in his five full seasons with the club.

The 1967 season was largely a struggle for Ed Charles. He came out of the gate slowly, managing just 15 hits in his first 61 at-bats, and only one of those for extra bases. The *A's* were looking to bring a rookie named Sal Bando at third. They turned the position over to Bando and traded Charles to the New York Mets for Larry Elliot and \$50,000. While

Bando would go on to anchor third for championship clubs after the *A's* moved to Oakland, he wasn't yet ready, and contributed little in what would be the club's final season in Kansas City. Charles, meanwhile, had a championship of his own ahead of him.

"I had no bad feelings about New York," Charles later recalled, "but I had been in Kansas City since 1962, and I thought I would finish up there. I was thirty-four years old at the time and I had talked with Mr. Finley, and he said they were thinking of making me a coach, so I was a little discouraged when they traded me. Any trade hits you hard, especially when it comes near the end of your career." His main regret was leaving his wife and the son he worried about so much. His wife Betty was from Kansas City and wouldn't be initially joining him in New York.

The 1967 season was a most unusual one for the Mets. It was their lone year under famed executive Vaughan P. "Bing" Devine, and the season was run more or less as a tryout camp, with Devine constantly bringing in new blood and dealing off the players who didn't make an impression. Fifty-four men would take the field for the team that season, the largest National League team ever. A 55th (Nolan Ryan) would suit up but not appear. They would also have two different managers (Wes Westrum and Salty Parker). It was a seemingly crazy way to run a franchise—the Mets fell backwards in the standings to 61 wins—but by the end, when Devine returned to the St. Louis team he had come from, he would leave behind almost every eventual contributor to the Mets' championship two years later.

The incumbent third baseman for the Mets at the time of the deal was Ken Boyer, and Charles wasn't looking like much of an upgrade, but Boyer was two years older, and Devine was looking to move him while he still had some trade value. By midseason Boyer was gone, and third base was Charles's alone, the latest (number 32) in an already long line of Met third basemen.

But the .238 average and a .319 slugging percentage Charles posted in 1967 were no guarantees that he would remain in New York. Had Devine remained, he may well have found another address for Charles. Under replacement GM Johnny Murphy and new manager Gil Hodges, Charles was removed

from the roster after the season, and came to camp in 1968 on a minor league contract.

But 1968 was a new year in more ways than a turn of a calendar page. Under Hodges, the Mets took the field with a renewed purpose and a seriousness absent in previous Mets seasons. Charles responded well to Hodges's regime, won back his job, and had a remarkable season. Though a .276 batting average, .328 on-base percentage, and .434 slugging percentage may not make the eyes pop at first glance, it has to be remembered that 1968 was to become known as "The Year of the Pitcher," with the entire National League hitting only .243. The Mets, as usual, took up the rear at .228, despite Charles's efforts.

A lot of things have to go right for a team to win a championship, a lot of players staying healthy, and a confluence of players having good or outstanding years at the same time. It's hard to imagine the Mets sniffing their eventual success of 1969 if Art Shamsky or Tommie Agee played as poorly as they did in 1968. Tug McGraw split 1968 between the minors and the military. But 1968 was actually Ed Charles's best year for the Mets. He even led the team in home runs, despite getting into only 117 games. What's more, his senior status helped define the Mets culture. Accounts have rookie Jerry Koosman nicknaming him "The Glider." It has largely been understood as a complimentary moniker, alluding perhaps to the fluid motion of the athlete in action, but there was a teasing element implied also, suggesting that the veteran Charles had learned to play with a certain degree of economy, never running faster than he had to make a play, never throwing the ball any harder than he had to beat the runner. Like the aircraft of the same name, The Glider could fly certainly, but never seemed to be providing any extra propulsion. "Pops" and "Old Man" were also names he heard in the clubhouse.

Charles took it in stride and became something of a field commander for Hodges and the attitudes he tried to instill.

Guys gravitated to me because I was older, both the black and the white players. Being in the minors so long was something a lot of them couldn't understand. They had made the bigs after a year or two. When I first got

there in 1967, they would laugh after losing games. That changed with Hodges. I wanted to make sure the guys didn't slip back into that frame of mind after the 1968 season. Nobody laughed when we lost. We were playing serious baseball."

Charles sensed divisions in the clubhouse that he sought to help heal. The longtimers—Ed Krane-pool and Ron Swoboda, specifically—seemed to clash with some of the younger players, primarily Tom Seaver. Charles also tried to keep Cleon Jones from getting down on himself, as he endured whispers that he wasn't hustling on the field.

But Charles's field leadership and clubhouse diplomacy in 1968 provided no more job security than his productive bat did. He was exposed to that year's expansion draft and asked owner Joan Payson (he called her "Mama Payson"⁹⁹) if he could return to the team the following spring as a non-roster player. When Montreal and San Diego each passed on him, that's what he did, and he ended up making the squad, even though he wasn't exactly clear how he fit into the team's plans. The Mets had a talented young outfielder in Amos Otis, but the club considered itself set at all three outfield positions. Having a reputation for being unable to establish more than a passing occupant at third, they envisioned a future for Otis at the hot corner, and Charles's duty was to help prepare Otis for the position and then bow out gracefully when Otis was ready. But Otis brashly considered himself the team's best outfielder, resisted the internship, and ended up playing few games at third base, to Charles's surprise as much as anybody's.

I wanted to help him (Otis) and I didn't worry about my job. I thought they would keep me as a pinch hitter anyway. He just didn't want to learn that position. He just hated third base. He was afraid of the ball down there and he wasn't going to learn."¹⁰⁰

The season opened with Ed playing the first seven games at third. Perhaps unready for regular duty, he got untracked slowly, hitting .154 over those first seven games. He yielded the position to Otis, then to utility player Kevin Collins, and finally to Wayne Garrett, a rookie acquired that offseason in the Rule V Draft.



By mid-May, Gil Hodges would settle on a platoon of Charles and Garrett. It was a jerry-rigged solution to be sure, but the team was already surprising the league by regularly playing competitive ball. Charles, easily the oldest player on a team that had borne the nickname of "The Youth of America" was fully aware that his days as a big leaguer were waning. He cherished the team's run of success, and began to take more seriously his role as a calming veteran presence on the squad. Charles was a regular among the team's contingent when they made charity visits, and he would counsel Jones and Tommie Agee—both from the Mobile, Alabama area (as was Otis)—about the ongoing adjustments to life in the majors as African-Americans. Charles also began bringing his son Eric to the park that summer, delighting in the boy giving his all with the other children on Family Day, and perhaps offering some perspective to his newly contending teammates. Charles's role as field general became more formal as well, so entrenched was he in the Gil Hodges command structure that actual orders no longer became necessary. "After a while I had these vibes with Gil," Charles recalled. "I wouldn't say anything and he wouldn't say anything, but I always knew what he wanted. I think I acted as his emissary on the field."¹¹

The only problem was that Charles wasn't hitting. And with the team in the hunt for this new prize called a "division championship," they needed him to.

There were many key markers the Mets needed to pass before achieving their miracle of 1969. For many teams, reaching—and then surpassing—a .500 record, at least after the first week of the season, is part of that journey. The Mets briefly reached that point at 18–18 on May 21 as Tom Seaver beat Phil Niekro and the Braves, but a mini-slump followed.

Charles's bat woke up in a big way on May 31. With second baseman Ken Boswell serving army reservist duty, Wayne Garrett was shifted to second, and Charles saw some time against right-handed pitchers, including that day's draw, future Hall of Famer Gaylord Perry. Down 2–0 at Shea, Charles slugged a three-run homer to put the Mets ahead in the fourth. He added an RBI single in the eighth to tally all of the Mets offense that day as they won,

4–2, the third victory of what would be an 11-game winning streak.

Two days later, on June 2, the Mets reached the .500 mark never to look back, as Jerry Koosman outduelled Claude Osteen of the Dodgers, 2–1. Charles, who entered the day hitting .147, scored the go-ahead run and added a double. As the media gathered around Koosman looking for a quote, he gave them a poetic salute to his poetic teammate that probably wasn't original, but it became seared that night into Mets history: "Never throw a slider to the Glider."

Charles's bat started heating up that June—to the tune of a .295 batting average and a .360 on-base percentage. And team was making their move as well, entering the month at 21–23, going 19–9 and ending the month eight games over .500. The first-place Cubs were hot also, and the Mets merely improved from nine games back to 7½, but the two teams would soon be meeting head-to-head.

Charles credits Gil Hodges platooning strategy with helping the team catch the Cubs that summer. (Three other positions besides third were shared on the Mets once Donn Clendenon joined the team in a mid-June trade.) "It wasn't just going against left-handers and right-handers. It also helped rest our guys. One of the reasons we caught the Cubs was that we were stronger in July and August. They were older and more tired than the rest of us."

Older, perhaps, then most of the Mets. If the platoon strategy kept other players strong deep into the summer, Charles's bat was cooling again. He batted .176 in July and .188 in August. The .207 batting average he would have at the end of the year was the mark of a borderline major leaguer, but this was a team where everybody's contribution was needed—and not just in the clubhouse. On September 24, as the Mets stood a game away from their division title, Shea Stadium was packed. There were six games left, but this would be their last chance to clinch the title at home. Their opponent was the Cardinals and emerging superstar southpaw Steve Carlton, who had struck out 19 Mets a week before. Now the Mets opened with a rally. Bud Harrelson led off with a single and Tommie Agee followed with a walk. After Cleon Jones fanned, Donn Clendenon stepped to the plate and slugged a three-run homer.

But the Mets and their righty platoon weren't done. After Ron Swoboda walked, Ed Charles took Carlton the other way, homering to right. It was the last of the 86 home runs in his late-starting career, and probably the biggest. He rounded third exuberantly clapping. The Mets cruised to a 6-0 win in their clincher, the only season in Charles's major league career that he played for a winning team.

Charles got into only 61 games that storied season, and the clincher was his last. He also sat out the three-game sweep of the Atlanta Braves in the inaugural National League Championship Series, as the Braves started three right-handed pitchers. Yet with the Baltimore Orioles throwing two lefties in their three-man World Series rotation, Charles looked to be back in action. "The worst feeling is not to be part of things" he said, "not to feel you've made a contribution." He had already told his friends of his intention to retire.

Batting sixth in Game One, Charles went 0-for-4 as the Mets dropped the first game with

Mike Cuellar besting Tom Seaver. Game Two featured a matchup of two lefthanders—Kosman and Dave McNally—and the two teams locked up in a 1-1 tie heading to the ninth. The Mets were in danger of dropping the first two games as their first two batters made outs and Charles stepped to the plate. McNally had struck out seven Mets that day and yielded only three hits, but one of these was a seventh-inning double by Charles, deep down the line in left. Charles was getting around, and he did so again, singling through the left side of the infield. Getting the steal sign a few pitches later, he took off for second with a 2-2 count on Jerry Grote, hustled into third on Grote's single to left, and scored the go-ahead run on the next pitch on a single by Al Weis.

But his day was not done. When Kosman couldn't finish the Orioles off in the ninth and walked two straight batters, Ron Taylor came in to face Brooks Robinson. The Orioles star worked the count full and Gil Hodges had the option of playing

Charles straight away, to guard against the game-tying single, or on the line, to prevent the game-winning double. Perhaps sensing Hodges's "vibes" as he claimed he could, he cheated a step or so toward the line. When Robinson pulled the ball toward the third base bag, Charles was able to slide over and make a nifty stop. But the play was only half over. His initial instinct was to get the force at third, but after starting in that direction, he realized pinch runner Merv Rettenmund had him beat. With little time to spare, he rushed the throw across the diamond, on line but low. Clendenon dug the ball out of the dirt and the Series was even.

Charles played in Games Four and Five as the Mets rallied in each contest to claim the world championship. He handled his chances cleanly but had no further hits. He had asked merely to make a contribution, and in Game Two he had. In the memorable photos of Jerry Kosman and Jerry Grote embracing after the final out of Game Five, one of



PHOTO COURTESY OF METS INSANE PITCH ACCURACY

As the club's elder statesman, Ed Charles provided leadership on a young team and helped show the likes of Bud Harrelson the ropes in the major leagues.



the most identifiable faces is that of Ed Charles running in from third, the veteran's face beaming like a child's. "This is the summit," Charles said later in the locker room celebration. "We're number one in the world and you just can't get any bigger than this."

That same joy animated the love affair America would have with the unlikely heroes over the next few weeks, with Ed's smile beaming through the ticker tape parade. When the parade stopped at Bryant Park, and the Mets were greeted by singer/actress/Mets fan Pearl Bailey, Edwin Charles was invited to recite a poem he had written back in 1962, when he had finally gotten his call to the majors. It began:

*Author of my talents, only You have I praised,
To 'Thee only shall my hands be raised.
For when I'm burdened with the weight of my team,
To my rescue You come, it will always seem.
For outstanding is my play on any given day
When You intervene and help lead the way.
Grateful to You I'll always be
For exploiting my talents for the world to see.*

The parade was followed by the team's appearance singing on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Like the club's comical attempt to cut a musical album, Charles enthusiastically participated. When he returned to Kansas City, his flight was greeted by a welcoming delegation of civic leaders. Then, a little over a month after the end of the championship season, on December 1, 1969, Charles was released. He retired from baseball on top, part of perhaps the unlikely championship team ever.

While the press took his side, sensing an injustice to the spirit behind that back-page smile, Charles was ready to go. He had a job offer from the Mets' promotion department and was ready to move on. But he and Mets GM Johnny Murphy had a falling out over moving expenses. Charles instead went to work in promotions for Buddha Records—a label known mostly for "bubblegum" acts like the Lemon Pipers and the 1910 Fruitgum Company, but also the home of novelty recordings, including the recent LP release, *The Amazing Mets*, that the team had recorded. (Buddha owner Art Kass would later marry Carol Kranepool, ex-

wife of the Mets' Ed.) As some Mets were offered \$10,000 each to form a Las Vegas lounge act that winter, Ed followed through on a commitment to join a baseball tour of US military bases in Asia, particularly Vietnam. Johnny Murphy would suffer two heart attacks that winter, the second one fatal. Murphy died just weeks after trading Amos Otis, the center fielder who wouldn't play third, for Joe Foy, the third baseman the Mets erroneously thought could take Charles's place.

The Charleses' second son, Eddie, was born in the spring of 1970, and Ed started his new career in promotion. He also tried some entrepreneurial enterprises, but found little success—neither in the novelty business, nor in furniture. But entrepreneurship brought Ed, in 1972, to the Small Business Administration in lower Manhattan, where happenstance introduced him to his idol. Putting together a line of baseball novelties, he was at the offices when he crossed paths with Jackie Robinson. Robinson, prematurely breaking down from diabetes exacerbated by the tireless schedule he kept as a civil rights advocate, was getting into the construction business. Charles found himself initially unable to speak, finally thanking Robinson for everything he endured on behalf of others.

"You're welcome. That means a lot to me," Robinson replied.¹² Robinson would be dead before the year was done.

Charles stayed around baseball in retirement, but he also applied the lessons he learned in baseball to other parts of life. As the Mets' fortunes faded in the 1970s, he was invited to return to the team as a minor league instructor and scout. He lasted nine years, scouting the heartland states from his Kansas City base. His greatest contribution during this era was perhaps his scouting and signing of Neil Allen, the Mets' 1976 draftee out of Kansas City's Bishop Ward High School. A top closer during the Joe Torre era, Allen is also remembered as one of two players traded by the Mets for Keith Hernandez, a key player on their 1986 squad. This connection allows one to argue that Charles contributed to both Mets world championships.

It was Charles's understanding was that he was being groomed to take over as director of community relations when Tommy Holmes retired. But he

again had a falling out—this time with colleague Ken Berry—and director of minor league operations Steve Schryver took Berry's side. Charles saw a racial element in the dynamic, and left. He had studied law enforcement at Rockford College in Illinois, and, having endured racial roadblocks throughout his playing career, he saw no reason to continue. He had other options.

Charles has since lived out much of his post-baseball life in New York City's Washington Heights, spending decades working with children in the city's Department of Juvenile Justice, and with Youth Options Unlimited in the Morrisania section of the Bronx. Supervising juvenile offenders in a low security environment, Charles was able to pass on lessons going back to his troubled and disadvantaged youth, trying to impart lessons that could steer his charges on a path to perseverance, as Jackie Robinson had done for him.

"I never tell them I played baseball," he said. "But most of them find out and the question they ask most is, 'Why are you here?' I tell them, 'I'm here because you're here.'"¹³

For his signature lesson, he would reach all the way back to his football coach at Gibbs High in St. Petersburg, reminding them that, like him with his failed punt, they'll get "another chance to make good."¹⁴

The late 1980s featured a new growth industry that was perfect for Charles—the baseball fantasy camp, and he became a regular guest at Florida sessions, instructing middle-agers in the finer points of the game and thrilling them with the same enthusiasm that captivated them two decades earlier. He would occasionally return to the baseball stage—often bringing the juveniles in his care to Shea Stadium—but sometimes at a higher profile, such as in 1997, when he participated in many of the festivities celebrating the 50th anniversary of Jackie Robinson breaking baseball's color line. Among other things, he was part of three-day symposium at Long Island University reading a poem he had written decades earlier after Robinson's death.

Yes, he made his mark for all to see

As he struggled determinately for dignity.

And the world is grateful for the legacy

That he left for all humanity.

So might the world be grateful for the legacy of Charles and those like him, who hammered out the promise Jackie Robinson initiated, and so turned the path Robinson carved into a highway.

Charles returned to Shea Stadium on several occasions, notably for celebration of the careers of longtime broadcasters Bob Murphy and Ralph Kiner, offering ballads in their honor. Murphy delighted in the appearance of Charles as one of the treats of Bob Murphy Night that he most appreciated. Of Kiner, Charles took the time to allude to the legend's famous malapropisms—suggesting that they tended to occur when he was most scripted, but that Kiner was at his best when he was off-script.

On September 28, 2008, the Mets played their final game at Shea Stadium, their longtime home. After a crushing loss that cost the team a playoff berth, the Mets held a ceremony honoring the history of the team and the stadium. Forty-three players were introduced to represent that history. Ed Charles played less than three seasons with the Mets, amassing merely 279 games and 214 hits. But there was a fondly recalled 75 year old Ed among superstars like Tom Seaver and Mike Piazza. It was a day for honoring excellence, but also for honoring something deeper that defined the team and their relationship with the fans through the years.

In his perseverance in the face of racial obstacles and his enthusiastic leadership for a miracle squad, Ed Charles could always be counted on to represent something deeper.

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Their Bats Weren't Miraculous—No Offense

The '69 Mets were not a potent club offensively. They were built on pitching and defense while scoring just enough runs to win consistently. It was a model that worked well, based on the club's 41–23 mark in one-run games.

Only one Mets regular, Cleon Jones, hit over .300 in 1969 (.340). Outfielder Art Shamsky hit .300 in a reserve role. Two other regulars hit over .270: Ken Boswell (.279) and Tommie Agee (.271). And only one Met, the leadoff hitter Agee, exceeded 20 home runs. He homered 26 times and scored 97 runs—impressive totals yet still not near the NL's top 10. No Met drove in over 80 runs, though Agee came closest, with 76. Jones, who that year had become the first Mets outfielder to start an All-Star Game, led the team in hits (164), steals (16), doubles (25), on-base-percentage (.422), and OPS (.904). Shamsky, though batting 180 fewer times than Jones, had a .488 slugging percentage—.006 higher than Cleon's career-best mark.

—Joseph Wancho